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ABSTRACT

Support groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, based on the 12 steps of recovery, have grown tremendously over the last several years. Personal narratives are an integral part of the recovery process because the signs that are used, and the semiotic webs that they form, are similar among people who belong to 12-step groups. In these groups, personal narratives serve as a form of catharsis, or psychological/emotional release. According to Prieto's theory of the semiotic act, the "sender" creates a sign for the expressed purpose of conveying information to a "receptor." Following the social performance paradigm of catharsis, 12-step programs successfully achieve catharsis among members because there appears to be a controlled identification between the speaker (performer) and the group (audience). Two widely recognized common themes in Alcoholics Anonymous are the process of self-introduction as an addicted person, and "hitting bottom." In Prieto's model, the introduction serves to get the attention of the group and serves the function of unity within the fellowship, while the admission of personal powerlessness summed up the phrases "hitting bottom" marks the beginning of self-recognition and the start of the process of recovery. Within 12-step programs, there are also numerous life metaphors. Two of the most significant are powerlessness and a "higher power" (crucial to the recovery process). The communication styles used in these programs, and the cohesiveness of the groups, provide the researcher with a cogent group or culture to study. Additionally, the symbols used within these groups are unique and easily definable, making them relatively uncomplicated to observe and study. (Attached are copies of the 12 steps and the 12 traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous and a 31-item bibliography). (NKA)

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A Semiotic Perspective on the Structure of Recovery

(A paper presented for the panel, "The Semiotic Boundaries of Human Experience," SCA Annual Meeting, 1992, Chicago, Illinois)

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Narratives and Catharsis in Recovery:
A Semiotic Approach to Twelve Step Programs

Abstract

Support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, based on the twelve steps of recovery, have grown tremendously over the last several years. Personal narratives are one of the primary tools used by members of these groups to share their experience and resolve uncertainty in their lives. This paper argues that the symbols used within recovery narratives enable people in recovery to identify with one another. This process of identification leads to a catharsis for recovering people.

Introduction

> As subjects, we are what the shape of the world produced by signs makes us become. . . .Perhaps we are, somewhere, the deep impulse which generates semiosis. And yet we recognize ourselves only as semiosis in progress, signifying systems and communicational processes. The map of semiosis, as defined at a given stage of historical development (with the debris carried over from previous semiosis), tells us who we are and what (or how) we think. (Eco, 1984, p. 45)

The Resource Directory of Los Angeles lists 94 different kinds of support groups available in the Los Angeles area alone. Formed to provide specialized help and support for people with emotional/psychological problems, they include disorders of every imaginable kind: from alcoholism to acrophobia, from overeaters to ostomates, from survivors of incest to sex addicts. Within the Los Angeles basin, over 10,000 of these "self-help" support groups meet on a weekly basis; and more are forming daily. In these groups, people seek help and understanding from those who share common goals and experiences.

The oldest and the largest of these self-help groups is Alcoholics Anonymous. Tradition Five of Alcoholics Anonymous notes that "[e]ach group has but one primary purpose--to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers" (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1982, p.10). The recovery process in Alcoholics

Anonymous is based on the "Twelve Steps" which are defined in the book Alcoholics Anonymous (1939). Various other support groups have found the "Twelve Steps" to be useful in recovery from other addictive or compulsive behaviors, and have adopted them into their own programs. As a collective, these groups are thus referred to as "Twelve Step Programs."

The recovery rate within Alcoholics Anonymous has never been accurately documented due to the fact that these groups keep no records of membership or meeting attendance as this would be a violation of both the Eleventh and Twelfth Traditions of anonymity (See Appendix II). Yet, the success of Alcoholics Anonymous is evident in terms of its growth. The origins of Alcoholics Anonymous can be traced back to the meeting between its two founding members, Bill W. and Dr. Bob in 1935. Since then, Alcoholics Anonymous has expanded across the country and eventually around the world. In 1989, it was conservatively estimated that there were over 85,000 groups in 114 countries (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976, p. xxii). In 1990, it was estimated that there were over 1.73 million members worldwide (Laerhaen, 1990, p. 51).

The Preamble of Alcoholic Anonymous notes that "Alcoholic Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other to solve their common problem and to help others to recover from alcoholism" (Alcoholics

Anonymous World Services, 1965, p. 1). A supportive environment is critical to the recovery model of any twelve step program. This support can take many different forms. Tolsdorf (1976) argues that support is "any action or behavior that functions to assist the focal person in meeting his personal goals or in dealing with the demands of any particular situation" (p. 410). This support functions to reduce uncertainty in one's life (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984, pp. 8-9). Robinson (1979) notes: "The move toward mutual support in A.A. was. . .made. . .through the realization that people with problems could help each other, and by doing so, help themselves" (p. 17).

Perhaps the most significant and distinguishing feature of these programs is the use of personal narratives to aid in the recovery process. That personal story-telling is a cathartic process is well-documented (cf. Labov, 1972; Labov and Fanshel, 1977; Peterson and Langellier, 1987; et. al.), but the process of identification through the symbols within narratives has largely been ignored. It is important to note that the primary motivation for the use of narratives is, in fact, the catharsis that occurs. Finally, it is important to realize that personal narratives in recovery are cathartic not only for the speaker (performer), but for the group (audience), as well. Leerhsen (1990) notes that "people have discovered that talking and listening to their fellow sufferers has a soothing effect on the psyche" (p. 50).

This paper reinforces the view that personal narratives are an integral part of the recovery process because the signs that are used, and the semiotic webs that they form, are similar among people that belong to twelve step groups. Specifically, I intend to show that because the semiotic webs are similar among the members of Alcoholics Anonymous, personal narratives serve as a form of catharsis, or psychological/emotional release. The "semiotic web," a metaphor I have borrowed from Deely (1990), represents experience as a whole. Jakob von Uexkull (1934) further clarifies that: "[a]s the spider spins its threads, every subject spins his relations to certain characters of the things around him, and weaves them into a firm web which carries his existence" (p. 14).

This paper will examine the predominant symbols that are found within the personal narratives of Alcoholics Anonymous members. This paper argues that through the use of personal narratives, support group members share a distinct level of identification with one another, which, in turn, leads tro a catharsis for people in recovery.

Theoretical Framework for Analysis

It is necessary at this point to develop a theoretical foundation upon which symbols can be analyzed. This analysis is grounded, to a great extent, in the work of Prieto and his 'l'acte semique. Prieto's theory is essentially a theory of indication, or

how signs represent something else. Hervey (1982) argues that in order for any particular phenomenon to indicate something else, two necessary conditions are involved: "(a) recognition that the indicating entity (object, event or circumstance, in short, any phenomenon that can be sensed) belongs to a specific class, and (b) ability to infer--from membership of the indicating entity in the given class--the fact that some other (indicated) entity belongs to a specific class" (p. 60).

Symbols are inherently ambiguous, and the interpretation of symbols is shaped by many different variables. Eco (1984) notes, however, that: "[w]hat is frequently appreciated in many so-called symbols is exactly their vagueness, their openness, their fruitful ineffectiveness to express a 'final' meaning, so that with symbols and by symbols one indicates what is always beyond one's reach" (p. 24). It is also important to note the arbitrary nature of symbols as this merely compounds the problem of interpretation by a receiver in a communicative situation. Eco notes that "[s]ymbols concern a contrived system of terms, each of which represent an element of another system" (p. 131). Prieto's 'l'acte semique attempts to note the relationships between these two "systems."

Prieto emphasizes the role of the sender in the semiotic act. According to his theory, a defining characteristic of the semiotic act is that the sender creates a sign (or signs) for the expressed purpose of conveying information to a "receptor" (receiver), and

that they "can only be successfully interpreted if the receptor recognises them to have been expressly produced for that purpose" (Hervey, 1982, p. 70).

Prieto distinguishes between "notificative indication" and "significative indication." According to his model, "[n]otificative indication is entailed as soon as a signal is produced. . .[it] indicates [to] the receptor the sender's intention to communicate something" (Hervey, 1982, p. 71). Notificative indication, on the most basic level, serves the purpose of getting attention. In essence, the sender is saying: "This is meant to communicate something." Prieto does not focus a great deal on notificative indication. He does, however, note that it is an important concept because it is the beginning of any semiotic/communication act (Hervey, 1982, p. 71). Significative indication is the remainder of the transaction, including the interpretation of the symbols used by the receiver.

Another fundamental element of Prieto's model is the distinction between the "Sematic field" and the "Noetic field." The Sematic field is defined as "the Universe of Discourse containing the 'signal' produced by the sender, together with all the alternative signals that could have appeared in its place, that is, with which it significantly contrasts" (Hervey, 1982, p. 72). Simply stated, the Sematic field involves all of the possible signals from which the sender could have chosen. For example,

using language, a sender trying to describe the color of the sky could use, as possible signals: blue, azure, indigo, or turquoise. These would be within the Sematic field. The Noetic field, on the other hand, includes all of the possible "indications" (interpretations or meanings) that can be furnished by the signals within the Sematic field.

Within a given semiotic act, then, a receiver creates a signal. The receptor takes that signal and identifies the particular Sematic field to which the signal belongs. By doing so, the receptor also is made aware of the corresponding Noetic field. This process creates uncertainty, because within the fields there exists a range of possible interpretations. Hervey (1982) notes that "[w]ithin the Noetic field which the receptor of a signal identifies, the receptor's uncertainty has the precise form of an indecision as to which of a number of mutually exclusive classes in the Noetic field he should fix on as the class to which the sender's message belongs" (p. 73). The larger the Sematic and Noetic fields, the greater the level of uncertainty. Thus, uncertainty is ultimately reduced by narrowing the fields.

Comprehension is a fundamental aspect of 'l'acte semique, and is an inherent component of the discussion about uncertainty. Hervey (1982) notes:

> Comprehension, therefore, can be seen as the dispelling (in part or totally) of the particular uncertainty in question,

> ideally by identifying the 'narrowest' Noetic class that corresponds to the signal in question. The members of this class are those messages ('indicated' entities) that are definitely not excluded from consideration through being inconsistent with the sender's production of the signal in question. (p. 73)

Simply stated, comprehension is the mutual understanding of signs between the sender and the receiver (receptor).

Narratives, Identification and Catharsis

Prior to the discussion of symbol usage within recovery narratives, it is necessary to develop an understanding of catharsis. Scheff (1979) notes that: "The theory of catharsis argues that thrill-seeking is an attempt to relive, and therefore resolve, earlier painful experiences which were unfinished" (p. 13). This seems to contradict the commonsensical notion, however, that human beings generally seek to avoid pain. I would argue that the pain of living with unresolved uncertainty is more unbearable than going through a cathartic experience. It is the feeling of identification with other members of twelve-step programs that make the support group a "safe" environment to undergo a cathartic experience. Scheff also notes that: "[t]he theory of catharsis further argues that unresolved emotional distress gives rise to rigid or neurotic patterns of behavior and that catharsis dissipates these patterns" (p. 14). Catharsis, for the purposes of

this study, simply refers to a reduction of uncertainty in one's life.

Berger (1989) defines identity as "the means of being the same as others in certain respects and maintaining a certain coherence in style" (p. 95). Sharing a level of identification is crucial to the recovery process in any support group. As Leehrsen (1990) notes: "[s]upport groups are based on the ancient concept of community as strangers gather to help one another by telling stories" (p. 53). It is through common experiences that recovering people are able to gain insight from one another.

The Preamble of Alcoholics Anonymous notes that members: "share their experience, strength and hope with each other to solve. . .[their] common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism." Communication that leads to perceived similarity among people has the effect of certainty reduction (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

Klapp (1969) notes regarding the concept of identification that:

> "Strictly it includes all things a person may legitimately and reliably say about himself--his status, his name, his personality, his past life. But if his social context is unreliable, it follows that he cannot say anything legitimately and reliably about himself. His statements of identity have no more reliability than a currency which

depends upon the willingness of people to recognize it and accept it. (p. 5)

Within the social performance paradigm of catharsis, it is important to note that one reason that twelve step programs successfully achieve catharsis among the membership is that there appears to be a controlled identification between the speaker (performer) and the group (audience). Scheff (1979) argues that in order for the narrative to have a cathartic effect for the audience, this identification must be "sufficiently intense so that the audience participates in the emotionally arousing scenes vicariously, but not so intense that the members of the audience forget where they are, relive the distressing experiences, and are unable to discharge" (p. 156).

There are number of common themes upon which members of Alcoholics Anonymous (and any other twelve step program) identify with one another. I will discuss two of the most widely recognized of these themes: the process of introduction as an addicted person, and "hitting bottom."

First, and probably the most widely recognized (at least among outsiders of twelve step programs) characteristic of Alcoholics Anonymous is the process of introducing oneself. Before any member of the fellowship speaks, s/he identifies him/herself as an addicted person. This simple statement generally takes the form: "My name is (first name) and I am an alcoholic (addict, etc.)."

For the purpose of this paper, this process of introduction serves two functions. First, this process is what Prieto would have called notificative indication. It serves to get the attention of the receptor(s). It says to the group, "Here I am. I am about to communicate something."

Second, this statement perpetuates the concept of anonymity. Sean A.[1] notes that: "Anonymity is a spiritual principle. And the principle is the practice of humility. What it says is that I give up my need to distinguish myself from you. . .We must recognize what is the same about us, and stop celebrating our differences" (Sean A., 1987, Cassette). In this one simple statement of introduction, each independent clause serves an important and unique function. "My name is _____," recognizes the individual; at the same time, by only using a first name, it promotes anonymity within the fellowship. The second clause, ". . .and I am an alcoholic (addict)," serves the function of unity within the fellowship. It implies that all members are similar--they share common experiences in that they are all addicted. By decreasing the uniqueness of the individual, a sense of community is developed that is necessary to the recovery process.

A second common theme that is addressed in the personal narratives of the members of Alcoholics Anonymous is that of

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[1] In keeping with the Twelfth Tradition, only first names are used to identify members of Alcoholics Anonymous.

"hitting bottom." The "First Step" in the recovery process states: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol--that our lives had become unmanageable" (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1981, p. 5). Inherent in this step is the idea that every alcoholic, in order to complete this step, must be ready to improve the quality of his/her life. This is what is meant by the phrase "hitting bottom." The importance of "hitting bottom," is addressed in The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions (1981): "We perceive that only through utter defeat are we able to take our first steps through liberation and strength. Our personal admissions of powerlessness finally turn out to be firm bedrock upon which happy and purposeful lives may be built." (p. 21).

This admission of personal powerlessness, or hitting bottom, "is achieved through some kind of culminating experience which makes the member realize the extent of the compulsive behavior" (Schroeder, 1990, p. 36). The identification process, is addressed in the preface to Alcoholics Anonymous (1976):

> If you have a drinking problem, we hope that you may pause in reading one of the forty-four personal stories and think: 'Yes, that happened to me'; or more important, 'Yes, I've felt like that'; or, most important, 'Yes, I believe this program can work for me, too'. (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976, p. xii)

It is important to note that there is no specific "level" that

a person must drop to have "hit bottom." This is an individual decision. All that is required by the first step is to admit that one is "powerless over alcohol." A member of Alcoholics Anonymous describes what it was like for him to hit bottom:

> I was trying to find an easier, softer way. By now it had become difficult to visualize a life without alcohol. However, my low had been reached. I realized I had been going down and down. I was unhappy myself and I had brought unhappiness to all who cared for me. Physically I couldn't take it anymore. Cold sweats, jumpy nerves and lack of sleep were becoming intolerable. Mentally, the fears and tensions, the complete change in attitude and outlook, bewildered me. This was no way to live. The time for decision had arrived, and it was a relief to say 'Yes' when my family said they would call Alcoholics Anonymous for me. A relief, even though I dreaded it, feeling that this was the end of everything (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976, p. 378).

Life Metaphors: Symbols in Recovery Narratives

The concept of life metaphor, developed by Catherine Sullivan Norton (1989), refers to how narratives ". . .liken life to something." These metaphors may be simplistic, but they carry with them strong personal interpretations. It is these interpretations, Norton observes, that are ". . .pervasive in everyday life in helping people cope" (Norton, 1989, p. 1).

Within the twelve step programs, there are numerous life metaphors. Schroeder (1990) identifies two of the most significant ones: personal defeat, and a "higher power" (p. 42). Personal defeat, or powerlessness, was discussed at length above. I will focus this discussion on the concept of the "higher power."

The "Second Step" states: "[We] came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity" (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1981, p. 25). Step Three also dictates that the concept of a higher power be personalized (See Appendix I). Therefore, conceptions of a higher power, or God, vary among members of Alcoholics Anonymous. The concept of a higher power is crucial to the recovery process in twelve step programs. Schroeder (1990) notes that:"[m]embers of such programs discover that they cannot achieve recovery alone, that they must recognize a source of power greater than themselves to guide their actions and give them the strength to carry out their recovery" (p. 44).

Despite the use of the word "God," twelve step programs emphasize that the member need not believe in a conventional God, but instead a God as the member "understands Him (or Her)." It is important to note that the word "God" is used synonymously with "higher power" and "power greater than ourselves" in Alcoholics Anonymous literature as well as personal narratives in A.A. meetings. Schroeder notes that "[t]he embodiment of power within these personal conceptions of God is achieved through naming.

Through the individual conceptualization and naming of a higher power, members of a twelve-step program are able to understand what the higher power means to them and how it is related to their own personal experience" (p. 45).

Prieto's theory has numerous applications when analyzing the life metaphor of a "higher power." This sign is a particularly interesting one to examine because it can be viewed on two different levels. When used in a narrative, members have a common understanding of the term, yet each individual member has a personalized understanding as well. It is also noteworthy that while different terms may be used to represent the higher power, members of twelve-step programs see them as synonymous.

In terms of the Sematic field, possible terms for the higher power could include: Creator, God, Father, power greater than oneself, Director, and the list could go on ad infinitum. The receptor would take the signal and upon identifying the Sematic field would also generate the Noetic field. This is where individual interpretation takes place. Because of the nature of the "Twelve Steps, each individual member develops a unique Noetic field. For some, a "higher power" may be God, while for another member it may be an object such as the ocean, or the moon. These different "interpretations" would make up the Noetic field.

It should be noted that within the twelve step programs, these terms for higher power would mean something completely different

than they would to a person outside of the group. This indicates that the context in which signals are used has a significant impact on the ultimate understanding of the symbol. This is one of the shortcomings of Prieto's theory. Prieto's model does not provide one with the foundation from which to analyze context.

Conclusions

The growth of twelve step programs, and other support groups as well, is an indication of the success that these programs produce. The communication styles that are used in these programs, and the cohesiveness of the groups, provides the researcher with a fairly cogent group or culture to study. The symbols used within these groups are unique and easily definable, making them relatively uncomplicated to observe and study.

This paper has shown the value of personal narratives within twelve step programs, and particularly through the stories of Alcoholics Anonymous members. I have noted the importance of identification in developing community that is necessary for catharsis to occur within the recovery process. Finally, this paper notes that through specific metaphorical signals, members of Alcoholics Anonymous come to understand each others problems, and they are able to, eventually, live productive lives.

Appendix I

The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous

Step One: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol (etc.)--that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step Two: Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Step Three: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

Step Four: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Step Five: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Step Six: Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Step Seven: Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Step Eight: Made a list of all people we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step Nine: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Step Ten: Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

Step Eleven: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

Step Twelve: Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry the message to alcoholics (etc.), and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Appendix II

The Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous

Tradition One: Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. (etc.) unity.

Tradition Two: For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority--a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

Tradition Three: The only requirement for A.A. (etc.) membership is a desire to stop drinking (etc.).

Tradition Four: Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. (etc.) as a whole.

Tradition Five: Each group has but one primary purpose--to carry its message to the alcoholic (etc.)who still suffers.

Tradition Six: An A.A. (etc.) group out never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. (etc.) name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

Tradition Seven: Every A.A. (etc.) group out to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

Tradition Eight: Alcoholics Anonymous (etc.) should remain forever non-professional, but our services centers may employ special workers.

Tradition Nine: A.A. (etc.), as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

Tradition Ten: Alcoholics Anonymous (etc.) has no opinion on outside issues, hence the A.A. (etc.) name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

Tradition Eleven: Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.

Tradition Twelve: Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all of our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

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